**“Things Won’t Always Be Like This”:**
Governor Greg Abbott’s *Operation Lone Star* and its Relative Impact on Mental Health

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*How has Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star impacted the mental health of Latino residents in Brownsville, Texas?*

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## Abstract

Latino subjects in Brownsville, Texas experience adverse mental health effects from their experiences within a political regime which attempts to elicit fear and opposition to immigration through state-led restrictive immigration policy. My thesis aims to better understand, first, how Latinos living in Texas respond to this anti-immigrant policy, and second, to what extent and in what ways their interactions with restrictive immigration policy shape their mental health. My research is informed by the work of scholars in political science who have examined the development of state-led immigration policy, using both the institutional political theory presented by Clayton & May (1999) and important case law beginning in the 19th century which aims to clarify the role of the state in regards to immigration enforcement. I will also integrate a special attention to developing a conceptualization of mental health in the context of politics, using literature from the discipline of social science medicine and psychology.

In pursuing these questions, I examine reactions to three measures taken under Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star (OLS), a restrictive immigration policy enforced in the state of Texas. To do so, I conducted fourteen in depth interviews with Latino subjects, all of whom are legal residents of Brownsville, Texas in order to gauge their perceptions of the following three OLS measures: razor wire, deployment of the National Guard at the border, and migrant busing to designated sanctuary cities. My findings suggest that the existence and interaction with anti-immigrant policy, specifically measures introduced under Operation Lone Star, contribute to adverse mental health effects. I suggest these effects include a sense of powerlessness, frustration, and intense fear of being mistaken as an immigrant. Using findings generated from these in depth conversations, this thesis contributes a well-theorized survey instrument that

integrates attention to these mental health effects, notably the fear of association described above.

## Chapter One: Construction of the "Immigrant Crisis"

**"**How did the officers know the difference between an alien and a citizen? Indeed, what did it mean that Border Patrol officers could stop, interrogate, and search without a warrant anyone, anywhere, in the United States?**"**

–Mae Ngai*, The Impossible Subjects (2004, 56)*

## Introduction

"*Governor Greg Abbott launched Operation Lone Star, deploying the Texas National Guard and Texas Department of Public Safety to the southern border. . .While the federal government ignores this crisis, Texas is holding the line.*" *-Greg Abbott (2021)*

With the help of the Texas Department of Safety (DPS) in 2021, Governor Greg Abbott has ushered in a new phase of state immigration policy, one that increases the role of the state itself in implementing and enforcing immigration measures. His Operation Lone Star has several moving pieces, including but not limited to: the implementation of razor wire along the United States-Mexico southern border, the increased deployment of National Guard troops to the border, and the busing of thousands of migrants out of the state of Texas– transporting them to "sanctuary cities" across the United States. Since its launch in 2021, Greg Abbott credits Operation Lone Star with achieving over 526,000 apprehensions of "illegal" immigrants along the southern border. In addition, the governor has claimed that as a combined result of these measures taken, illegal crossing into the state has decreased by over 85%.

While controversy surrounding immigration is not new for politics nor political science, the manner in which Greg Abbott approaches immigration policy enforcement is. What sets Greg Abbott apart from other state officials is his insistence on solving the "crisis" through his Operation Lone Star initiative, regardless of federal jurisdiction and authority (Blitzer 2025). Abbott's claim that the state of Texas is being "invaded" and the federal government [specifically the Biden Administration] is failing to address the problem has set the stage for a myriad of debates and reactions to unfold in regards to immigrants. Of these reactions, the notion that

“Greg Abbott single handedly changed the national politics around immigration”, is particularly noteworthy (Blitzer 2025).

Therefore, my thesis engages questions of immigration and racial politics through an examination of the lived experiences of Latino political subjects living and operating within the measures set forth by Greg Abbott’s Operation Lone Star. Through this thesis I aim to gain a better understanding of how Latinos interact with and understand this restrictive immigration policy, and to what extent these interactions shape their thinking, emotions, or overall mental state.

To answer these questions, I conducted a series of in depth interviews with Latino political subjects who are forced to navigate the measures enforced under Operation Lone Star. I focus on three specific OLS measures: the placement of razor wire along the southern border, the deployment of National Guard troops to the border, and the migrant busing program which transports migrants out of Texas into designated sanctuary cities. In placing an emphasis on these three specific measures of Operation Lone Star, I aim to understand how legal Latino residents are forced to interact with and feel effects of restrictive immigration enforcement led by their state government, regardless of their own citizenship status. In other words, by analyzing the interactions of Latino citizens and legal residents with Operation Lone Star enforcement, I hope to explore how and to what extent the effects of immigration policy are not confined to immigrants, but spill over to the Latino community as a whole. Thus, I pose the following research question: How has Greg Abbott’s Operation Lone Star impacted the mental health of Latino residents living in Brownsville, Texas?

What became clear from my research was the existence of a sense of fear within the Latino community, a fear at being associated with immigrants and an intense desire to separate

themselves from immigrants–regardless of their own citizenship status. Participants in this research expressed uneasiness about associating with immigrants, using specific language which clearly distinguished "us" [Latinos] from "them" [immigrants]. The expressed fear of being mistaken as an immigrant, and more specifically as an *illegal* immigrant, prompted many participants to adopt this language of "us" vs "them" as a method of self preservation. Not only is their understanding of immigration enforcement policy tied to their perceptions of immigrants, the presence of this fear suggests that restrictive immigration enforcement can influence their self-perception also.

Within the following sections I will review literature which provides the historical context and theoretical concepts necessary for understanding the political context in which my research takes place ("Chapter One: Construction of the Immigrant Crisis"). Then, I will explain my research question and the methodology of my research ("Chapter Two: Fear Within the Latino Community"). Next, I will present and analyze the findings of my research ("Chapter Three: The MAGA Regime"). Within this third and final chapter I will be placing existing political institutional scholarship in conversation with the lived experience of Latinos in Brownsville, Texas. Finally, I will summarize my thematic findings in a concluding section which will present a theoretically informed survey instrument for measuring immigration policy support among Latinos. By centering this thesis around the lived experiences of Latinos themselves, I hope to let these individuals' stories speak to the potential impacts a restrictive immigration policy can have on people on the ground.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

This literature review will provide the historical context and theoretical concepts necessary for exploring the relationship between immigration politics and the mental health of Latinos in the United States today. First, I will review literature outlining the historical construction of the "illegal alien" in both law and society, focusing particularly on the case of Mexican immigrants in the 20th century ("Creation & Expansion of the "Illegal Immigrant").

I will also engage with literature which analyzes and critiques conceptualizations of institutions, including a long standing debate between rational choice institutionalism and historical interpretive institutionalism. Within this section I will also engage with the concept of political regimes, a conceptual framework for understanding the influence of a larger political atmosphere that extends beyond the institution itself ("Regime Theory: Understanding Institutional Relationships").

Necessary historical context includes a series of court decisions which question the role of individual states in enforcing immigration. Within this section of the literature review ("The Federal Immigration Order"), I will engage with a series of relevant court decisions dating back to the nineteenth century which have left avenues open for the expansion of state jurisdiction.

Finally, I will turn to literature in social science and psychology to elaborate on the concept of mental health in the context of contemporary immigration politics ("The Spill-Over Effect: Latino Health in the Context of Immigration Politics"). Within this section I engage with literature that argues mental health is directly impacted by political institutions and should be understood separately from physical health.

### Creation & Expansion of the "Illegal Alien"

The first literature that is relevant pertains to the development and understanding of the term “illegal” and its perceived association with Latinos. As the historian Mae Ngai (2004) explains, this development of “illegal” was not random, and is a pillar of what she defines as a distinctive anti-immigrant “immigration regime”.

Throughout the twentieth century, American immigration policy went from welcoming to unwelcoming, from open to restrictive. Through the development of immigration policy, the concept of the “illegal alien” was constructed in both law and society. The “illegal alien” becomes to be understood as the enemy of the United States. The “illegal alien” is understood as an abstract, invisible enemy, hiding in America’s midst, yet, this term also describes real immigrants living in and contributing to the community (Ngai 2004, 63). This contradiction does not end with the construction of “illegal alien” in the law, as the “alien citizen” in society is deemed foreign by the American ideals of citizenship and race, rather than the virtue of their birth (Ngai 2004, 2). The elaboration and the application of these concepts both within policy and society will be the focus of this section.

First, Ngai (2004) argues that restrictive immigration policy marked the beginning of a new political regime, one that associated minority groups with unassimilable aliens, and was rooted in developing ideas about race and citizenship. One of the most notable restrictive policies of the twentieth century was the 1924 Johnson Reed Act, in which numerical limits to immigration were placed and the so-called “white race” was more clearly defined (Ngai 2004, 3). This immigration policy defined the United States in the terms of both nationality and race, as the quota system codified the “white” race in the law. In other words, the notion of a distinct racial difference between the “white” race and the “colored” races contributed to the use of

"racial superiority", and more specifically, "white superiority" as a justification for restrictive immigration quotas based on country of origin (Ngai 2004, 25).

On paper, the law stipulates that quotas do not include "(1) immigrants from the [Western Hemisphere] or their descendants, (2) aliens ineligible for citizenship or their descendants, (3) the descendants of slave immigrants, or (4) the descendants of the American aborigines" (Ngai 2004, 26). Further, the so-called "colored" races were imagined to have no country of origin, to lay outside the concept of citizenship (Ngai 2004, 27). But, how could one tell the difference between citizens, immigrants, or "aliens ineligible for citizenship"? Is a binary "colored" vs. "white" racial distinction sufficient for telling the difference? Most importantly, where do Mexican immigrants fit into this picture of the United States? Ngai not only identifies these problems within her book, but she also provides a detailed answer.

She does this through a detailed discussion of the case of Mexican immigrants, further elaborating the practical applications of the concepts of citizenship, racial difference, and "illegal alien". In the case of the Immigration Act of 1924, Mexican immigrants were not subjected to numerical limits under the quota system (Ngai 2004, 7). Ngai elaborates that although the agricultural labor need for Mexican immigrants impeded the restriction of Mexican immigration, and although the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and now the Immigration Act of 1924 both deem Mexican immigrants to be "white" under the law, the situation of Mexican immigrants was much more complicated than it appeared on paper (Ngai 2004, 50-51). Immigrants coming from Mexico were still subject to existing visa requirements and border control policies however, requirements that made inaccessible a legal pathway to the United States. Therefore, with limited access to the country, Mexican immigrants became the country's largest group of undocumented, or illegal, aliens by the late 1920s (Ngai 2004, 7).

Furthermore, the "immigration regime" described by Ngai had major consequences for Mexican immigrants, as it constructed a racial hierarchy and centered illegal immigration as the priority for immigration law. This newfound association between illegal immigration and Mexicans was further supported by an "emergent race problem", which witnessed the extension of Jim Crow laws to Mexicans in Texas, and the creation of "Mexican" as a separate racial category in the United States Census (Ngai 2004, 7). The intersection between legal codification of race and the social implication of race cast Mexicans as permanently foreign, as something that did not fit into the ideas of American citizenship. As Ngai (2004) elaborates, even if Mexicans were born in the United States and afforded legal citizenship, they continued to be viewed as alien socially. Therefore, as Ngai argues, the "colored" vs. "white" racial distinction is insufficient for capturing the unique application of restrictive immigration policy to Mexican immigrants.

The second literature relevant for exploring the racialized nature of the term "illegal" and its association with Latinos expands on the ideas presented by Mae Ngai by analyzing race through a political science perspective, rather than a historical perspective.

Dawson and Cohen (2002) explore the development of racialized subjects more broadly, expanding on the concepts of "racial ordering" and "racialization". The first concept, "racial ordering", is understood as the dynamic, changing process in which groups of people [either native born or immigrant] are constructed as races and positioned in society depending on their perceived race (Kim 2000, 38; Dawson and Cohen 2002, 494-495). It is through this position that opportunities, constraints, and resources are afforded to the subject. In other words, the assigned position given to a racialized subject will shape their political behavior and distinct interactions with political institutions.

The second concept, “racialization”, is understood by Dawson and Cohen to mean the historical processes in which a subject can be assigned into a specific position within a system or institution. This proposes that racialization shapes a person’s political behavior, or in other words, can shape how one perceives others' positions as well as their own position in and outside of an institution, influencing how they behave as a result.

Dawson and Cohen (2002) argue that racial categories are considered a given in previous literature, which fails to account for the social and historical contexts in which subjects become racialized or categorized (490). They utilize the definitions of ascription and arbitrary to characterize their conceptualization of racial classifications in the United States, claiming the placement of groups within categories are not random, despite having little to do with biology (Dawson and Cohen 2002, 490-491). Further, they urge political science scholars to shift from individualist models that fail to integrate attention to historical context in which racial and ethnic identities are given meaning (491). The racial order in the United States, as argued by Dawson and Cohen, both structures and is structured by society, politics, political institutions, and the state (492).

One final argument provided by Dawson and Cohen is the movement away from a black-white dichotomy to better understand racialization and political behaviors. As they argue, other scholars are considering the ways in which race has shaped state policy, as well as the designation of “citizen” (Dawson and Cohen 2002, 509).

### Regime Theory: Understanding Institutional Relationships

The next body of political science literature relevant to understanding the interactions of Latinos with immigration enforcement measures pertains to the role of institutions in drafting and enforcing policy.

Kenneth Shepsle (1995) provided a detailed list of the lessons to be learned from the rational choice and behavioral approaches to understanding institutions. First, he explains how behavioral students of politics in the mid-twentieth century attempt to understand empirical regularities through the behavior and properties of individuals. Shepsle claims the behaviorism approach to institutions was remarkable, as it showed little interest in institutions at all; for behaviorists, institutions are simply shells. There is no political power or meaning to be found in institutions, rather political power and meaning comes from the individuals who inhabit institutions (Shepsle 1995, 279). A behavioral theory aggregates the individual's roles, status, and learned responses, whereas a rational theory aggregates individual choices based on preferences or previously held beliefs (Shepsle 1995, 280). The rational choice approach, which became popularized in the 1960s and 70s, is considered the renewal of interest in studying institutions, rather than the relationships among individuals.

The expansion of the behavioral theory of institutions allowed for the importance of studying institutions themselves to come to light. Although behavioral institutional scholars continue to assert that individuals bring their previously held beliefs to formal and informal institutions, explanations using only the idea of maximizing behavior is inadequate. Institutionalists like Shepsle include in their conceptualization the structural features and procedures of institutions, aiming to explain social outcomes both from the understanding of agent preferences, optimization of behavior, and institutional features (Shepsle 1995, 282). The work of Shepsle specifically urges political scientists to consider the specific institutions being analyzed, urging political scientists to explore the process of institutional choice through the following questions:

> What are the rules of this game? Who are the players? What subsets are sufficient to effect changes–that is, which are the decisive coalitions? In sum, the process of the choice of institutions must be modeled explicitly (Shepsle 1995, 291).

Interpretative institutionalism goes beyond the idea of "self interest" to consider the larger political context in which actors and institutions are operating. New institutionalists are able to consider that a myriad of factors, such as external pressures or cultural norms, can influence behavior of institutional actors. Therefore, interpretive institutional theory allows for the condition in which a subject's political behavior or political preferences are not always in their own self interest. In addition, interpretative institutional theory allows for political actors to interpret the political institutions around them, both their meanings and their functions. This more flexible theory alleviates the issues that arise under a behaviorist approach.

However, many rational choice scholars such as Terry Moe (1985) conceptualize political institutions through a "Positive Theory of Institutions". This theory claims "all participants are assumed to be rational and self interested" (Moe 1985, 1097). In other words, institutional actors are motivated to maximize their own individual policy preferences, regardless of influences outside of their own self interest. This also means there is no account for the sociopolitical landscape in which these institutions are operating under the assumption of this theory. Therefore, although rational choice theory (PTI) provides a basic framework for understanding one motivation for political decisions, this theory fails to explain the influences of outside societal pressures or desires. As such, a rational choice approach would not be useful for the purposes of this paper as it would not explain the larger political context in which Operation Lone Star was passed. Specifically, PTI could not account for the anti-immigration rhetoric signaling an "invasion" that Governor Abbott gives frequent reference to, nor the popularization

of said rhetoric by former president Donald Trump in 2016. Further, rational choice thinkers make reference to "institutional constraints" in which political actors are optimizing their best interests.

Returning to interpretative institutional theory, the work of Clayton and Gilman (1999) can better account for the influence of external factors on the decisions made by political institutions. Their theory aims to explain how "institutions are not merely influenced by, but are inseparable from, the web of social patterns of cognition and evaluation, such as ideology, religion, class, race, and gender that situates all social activity" (Clayton et al 1999, 33). Under this new conceptualization of institutional operations, there is a new emphasis on the social context behind institutional decisions.

Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek (1996) expanded this interpretive institutional scholarship to create a "political universe organized and activated by intercurrence-engagements throughout the polity of the different norms embedded in institutions, the terms of control contested, in the ongoing push and pull among them" (Orren & Skowronek 1996, 112). This new concept, called intercurrence, accounts for the specific political history and landscape in which an institution is operating. There are distinct expectations and roles of specific institutions depending on a wider sociopolitical context. These expectations can coincide or clash with other institutional expectations.

In addition to the intercurrence concept, this research project will implement a conceptual framework called the political regimes approach by Cornell Clayton and David May (1999). This newer institutional analysis provides insight into the effects of a political atmosphere– one that is not limited to an individual or a specific institution. Instead, this theory emphasizes the need to account for a larger regime in which all individuals and institutions are operating within.

Under this political regimes approach, the role of a governmental institution is dependent on the interrelationships between powerful forces and groups within a larger political system. Decisions made by these government institutions are largely influenced by their relationships with other institutions and their perceptions of what their role in a larger political regime should be. Clayton and May explain "that law itself is dependent on relative institutional relationships within the political system…individual legal institutions are themselves embedded within, and draw meaning from, the larger political regime" (Clayton & May 1999, 117). This approach emphasizes the need to address political contexts and expands institutional analysis to address a wider political regime. While the political regimes approach was written specifically to analyze the court, this theory can be applied to all governmental institutions. In this case, the state and federal government.

## The Federal Immigration Order

Next, it is important to review relevant case law pertaining to the roles of the state and the federal governments in immigration policy. This section will engage with the debate between federal and state authority over immigration enforcement, ending with cases pertaining directly to Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star.

First, Kunal Parker (2015) has traced the progression and contestation of federal vs state jurisdiction over immigration enforcement. Although the federal government has claimed its authority over immigration both through a constitutional power and through legal decisions, the ambiguity of these arguments have left open questions for where state intervention can be implemented. Therefore, elaboration of how these ambiguities have been created will be important for understanding the claims made by Greg Abbott and the relevant court decisions related to his implementation of Operation Lone Star.

To begin, federal immigration authority has been contested dating back to the nineteenth century. Two Supreme Court cases, *New York vs Miln* (1837), and the *Passenger Cases* (1849) provide an excellent example of how state authority has been elaborated in the past. The decision made by Justice Stephen Field upheld the right of the state to "exclude from its limits any persons whom it may deem dangerous or injurious to the interests and welfare of its citizens" (Parker 2015, 117). This decision seemingly supported the right of the state to enforce its own immigration legislation. However, further interpretation of these cases actually reaffirmed the federal government's authority over the state. The decision was elaborated as, "the power of the state ... grew out of the necessity which the southern states, in which the institution of slavery existed" (Parker 2015, 117). The justices that created this decision ultimately found the state's power in regards to enforcing immigration was a function of the past, that it was something only permitted in the political context of slavery. However, after the Civil War, this was no longer a necessity and federal authority could once again prevail under the Supremacy Clause in the Constitution. Yet, the wording of "danger to the interests of its citizens" left open a potential avenue for future state intervention.

Next, *Chuy Lung v Freeman (1875)* was a landmark case clarifying the role of the federal government in enforcing immigration policy in the United States. The decision given by Justice Millerexplains that "the passage of laws which concern the admission of citizens and subjects of foreign nations to our shores belongs to Congress, and not to the states. It has the power to regulate commerce with foreign nations. The responsibility for the character of those regulations and for the manner of their execution belongs solely to the national government. If it be otherwise, a single state can at her pleasure embroil us in disastrous quarrels with other nations" (Chy Lung vs Freeman 1875, 92 U.S. 275). Consequently, this is another instance of where the

federal government asserts its jurisdiction over immigration enforcement through legal interpretation. Here, the federal judges insist that the Constitution has granted the federal government the sole authority to regulate immigration, and this interpretation continues to be used by the Biden administration.

Furthermore, *Fong Yue Ting vs United States (1893) fo*und … "in the United States, the power to exclude or to expel aliens is vested in the political departments of the National Government, and is to be regulated by treaty or by act of Congress, and to be executed by the executive authority according to the regulations so established, except so far as the Judicial Department is authorized by treaty or by statute, or is required by the Constitution, to intervene" (Fong Yue Ting vs US 1893, 149 U.S. 698.). Finally, *Yamataya v. Fisher* (1903) clarified once again that states were not able to "cause an alien who has entered the country, and has become subject in all respects to its jurisdiction, and a part of its population . . . to be taken into custody and deported" (Parker 2015, 129). This case, while upholding the federal government's authority to enforce immigration, left open the possibility that a state could detain illegal immigrants if they will be given "all opportunity to be heard upon the questions involving his right to be and remain in the United States" (Parker 2015, 129).

In addition to past legal precedent, language found within the fourteenth amendment has provided new avenues for addressing citizenship and immigration legislation. The amendment states that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside" (Parker 2015, 117). The establishment of the 14th amendment not only clarifies the definition of citizenship, but also makes this applicable to all persons living in the United States - without specifying a connection to race. Therefore, following the Civil War and the implementation of the 14th

amendment, there was a newfound federal claim to the enforcement of immigration legislation. Therefore under this specific political regime, the right to protect citizenship and immigration fell into the hands of the federal government. As elaborated by Parker, "the constitutional grant of national citizenship …made it possible to reopen the question of the constitutionality of state-level immigration regimes…[as such] a federal immigration regime came into being" (Parker 2015, 118).

As interpreted by the US Supreme Court, the new federal immigration power was a "'plenary power,' one not grounded in any portion of the constitutional text, not limited by any particular provision of the U.S. Constitution, and largely immune from substantive judicial review" (Parker 2015, 119).

Although this seemed to be the end of the debate, governor Greg Abbott has evoked the Constitution to argue otherwise. Using Article I section 10, Abbott argues that the state of Texas does have the right to defend itself under this article and through the enforcement of restrictive immigration policy, as the state is actively being "invaded" (Mendez 2024). This argument has reignited the debate, allowing the court to once again weigh in on the ability of Greg Abbott to enforce a measure known as Senate Bill 4, as well as the Operation Lone Star measure that restricts access to Texas through the placement of razor wire along the border.

Senate Bill no.4 was a proposed Texas law which would allow state officials to arrest anyone they suspect of crossing the border illegally, with the authority to deport if they cannot provide proper documentation. The bill appeared to expand the power of the state government in enforcing immigration law, allowing Texas police to also detain those suspected of not having documentation (Mendez 2024). However, the Biden Administration sued the state of Texas, arguing the state did not have that authority, as immigration enforcement falls under the

jurisdiction of the federal government. United States District Judge David Ezra blocked the bill from going into effect, saying that the law threatens "the fundamental notion that the United States must regulate immigration with one voice" (Garcia 2024). This ruling was appealed with the case going to the US 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, where Ezra's ruling was reversed. The Biden Administration then appealed to the Supreme Court, who refused to rule on the constitutionality of SB4, and instead chose to temporarily block the law as it considered the request from the federal government to stop the law from going into effect. The future of Senate Bill no. 4 may still be uncertain, though Texas has not been permitted to allow the bill to go into effect as of yet.

In the case of *DHS vs Texas* (2024), the Texas government argued that the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents who cut down sections of razor wire were infringing on the right of the state to use razor wire as a means of immigration enforcement. The 5th United States Circuit Court of Appeals had temporarily prohibited the removal of the razor wire, with the only exception being the case of medical emergencies. However, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appealed that decision, taking the case to the Supreme Court who reversed the lower court's decision in a 5-4 ruling which now permitted the CBP agents to cut or remove the wire to perform their duties as needed. While the state of Texas argued that the agents did not have the authority to tamper with state-owned property, the Supreme Court ultimately sided with the DHS by arguing the razor wire prevents CBP agents from doing their jobs of apprehending and processing migrants who have illegally crossed the border (DHS vs Texas 2024). Once again, the court asserts the federal government's authority over immigration enforcement by stating enforcement of immigration law falls under "matters for which the federal government, not Texas, is held politically accountable" (Frederick 2024).

## The Spill-Over Effect: Latino Health in the Context of Immigration Politics

Finally, I will turn to psychology and social science literature pertaining to mental health in order to explore what mental health means in the context of politics.

Henderson (2019) considers the relationship between health outcomes and political environments, claiming that a political environment including anti-immigrant rhetoric and anti-immigrant policy can directly affect people. Furthermore, the anti-immigrant environment can influence their interactions with the healthcare system, making it difficult to speak about immigration even in settings that are supposedly confidential (Henderson 2019, 92).

Henderson suggests that contrary to the conventional wisdom, there may not be lower rates of mental illness in migrant populations. While he concedes immigrants may have lower rates of mental illness in general, younger generations tend to have worsening symptoms, specifically when discussing mood and anxiety disorders (Henderson 2019, 97). Henderson points to anti-immigration rhetoric and policy as potential reasons as to why immigrants will or will not access mental health services. Therefore, he proposes a model of "cultural competency" in which an awareness of the effect of anti-immigrant sentiment is crucial for understanding the relationship of immigrant families to mental health (Henderson 2019, 99).

Seth Holmes describes the relationship between health and politics from the perspective of undocumented workers, building on the work of Henderson to explicitly consider the effect of fear on seeking out health services. He argues that the conventional wisdom data suggesting better health for Latinos is skewed, as most undocumented workers fear reporting health problems– leading to a "healthy worker bias" (Holmes 2006, 1777).

Holmes crafts a definition of poor health in the context of undocumented workers, pointing to four health issues that are prevalent within these communities, including occupational

injury, somatization, substance abuse, and trauma (Holmes 2006, 1782). Included within these issues is disrespect from supervisors, lack of opportunities, and fear of deportation (Holmes 2006, 1785). Within this definition, he conflates both physical and mental well being, saying each one of these common issues need to be resolved in order to be healthy. This definition of health differs from the conceptualization provided by Henderson, as this suggests that mental well being and physical well being are inseparable, that the relationship between ethnic prejudices and health experience of migrant workers can only be understood through both physical and mental health. The previous discussion argued that it is necessary to isolate mental health outcomes when understanding the relationship between political climate and the health of Latinos.

Moreover, Holmes provides two definitions of violence that are relevant for characterizing the potential effects policy can have on the health of Latinos as well as other minority groups. First, structural violence refers to visible physical injuries to the body enacted by social structures (Holmes 2006, 1789). Second, symbolic violence refers to naturalization and internalization of social asymmetries. In other words, symbolic violence explains how people perceive the social world through lenses issued forth from the social world (Holmes 2006, 1789). Through these models, Holmes claims that health is influenced both on a physical and mental level, from institutions to individual self perceptions. Only by understanding how both structural and symbolic violence can affect migrant workers can there be progress (Holmes 2006, 1791).

Rothenburg (2000) analyzes mental health of migrant farm workers in the context of anti-immigration reforms. Within this work, he argues that societal structures built on inequality take up space for thinking, learning, and making choices that improve livelihood (Rothenburg 2000, 1). He refers to this space as “mental bandwidth”, which can be especially impacted within

minority groups who are preoccupied with issues like economic inequality or fear of personal safety. He argues that systemic barriers such as the cost of mental healthcare and the lack of transportation directly contribute to this lack of mental bandwidth (Rothenburg 2000, 22).

Gentsch also documents the effects of restrictive immigration and border policies on the population, but specifically Mexican migrant workers in the United States. Contrary to the earlier discussion of the regime proposed by Mae Ngai (2004), Gentsch began the discussion of the restriction regime in 1986, with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (Gentsch 2011, 878).

Pedraza et al (2017) also argues that healthcare utilization is adversely affected by restrictive immigration policy, but expands this research to Latino community more broadly. They suggest the fear of deportation causes members of this community to shy away from sharing personal details, specifically citizenship status, across clinical and service providing organizations (Pedraza 2017, 925). Not only does this paper expand this assertion to Latino migrants, but also suggests that these results can be extrapolated to Latino citizens as well. They suggest that Latino citizens are less likely to make an appointment with healthcare providers, and that Latinos who know of someone who has been deported are more likely to perceive information shared with healthcare providers as non-confidential and non-secure (Pedraza 2017, 925). In this paper, they refer to this behavior as "risk avoidant" behavior. This behavior is not only found in migrant communities, as alluded to by the previous scholars, but can be found within Latino citizens also. This paper refutes conventional wisdom that because United States citizens are not personally at risk due to restrictive immigration policies, their interactions with the healthcare system will not be shaped by those policies (Pedraza 2017, 927). Instead, these

scholars find that fear for members of their social networks do in fact shape interactions with healthcare and healthcare related systems.

They also make a distinction between the "stop and frisk" policies and the "show me your papers" laws that disproportionately target people of color. In this study, the scholars are interested in the strategies and behaviors learned by Latinos from these restrictive immigration policies (Pedraza 2017, 931). California's 1994 Proposition 187 aimed at restricting undocumented immigrants from using public schools and public hospitals, which on the ground, reinforced the conflation of ethnicity with citizenship status (Pedraza 2017, 933). Arizona's S.B. 1070 mandated local police officers to inquire about immigration status during traffic stops (Pedraza 2017, 934). Latino citizens are not the intended target of immigration policies such as these. However, the personal connections most Latino citizens have to those who are vulnerable to immigration restriction policies should influence their attitudes about the security of healthcare clinics and hospitals. They find that the proximity to undocumented immigrants share their concerns and fear about sharing information with healthcare providers, and negatively influence the likelihood of scheduling an appointment with healthcare providers (Pedraza 2017, 952).

The link between public policy and health has been explored in the past by Vicente Navarro (2001), finding a strong correlation between the ruling political ideology and political party with the health of the population. This study finds, "political variables such as the political party in government…are important in influencing a country's level of income inequalities and social inequalities and its health indicators" (Navarro 2001, 19).

Morgan Philbin (2018) explains how state-level exclusionary policies can impact migrant health. He found the effect of state legislative activity related to immigration influenced the

accessibility to state benefits such as transportation, education, and healthcare services. As a consequence of these policies, both migrants and Latinos were subject to adverse health risks. Another benefit of using this study in particular was the diverse array of state-level policies he chose to investigate. Not only did he find specific immigration policies to contribute to adverse health, but he found immigration-adjacent policies to also contribute. Such policies included the access to healthcare, a bilingual education, and access to drivers licenses (Philbin 2018, 29-38). A key contribution from this work is the articulation of the "spill-over effect" –he found that regardless of immigration status, Latinos and migrants alike experienced adverse health risks as a result of these policies.

Vargas et al. has detailed a similar exploration into the effects of state level immigration policy. Instead of describing a "spillover effect", he describes the "fear of association", in which he finds,

> Even though Latino citizens may not be directly harmed…they recognize that friends and family members are going to be directly impacted…regardless of their personal immigration status, they could be impacted by punitive laws if they happen to look like an immigrant (Vargas, 2017, 474).

# Chapter Two: Fear within the Latino Community

## Theory & Hypotheses

For the purposes of this project, the political regime in which the current debates of immigration are operating is largely influenced by the "Make America Great Again" campaign promise created by Republican nominee Donald Trump in 2016. Not only has this campaign promise influenced immigration policy in the past, but is now even more crucial, given the recent re-election of Trump to the presidency in 2024. As elaborated by Callaghan (2019), "President Trump has emphasized immigration as a top priority through his rhetoric and his declaration of a national emergency to build a wall along the US-Mexico border". This specific rhetoric used by the president constituted a state of fear, especially through the use of terms such as "national security" and "emergency". President Trump's "MAGA" rhetoric is not bound to the federal government–and has become a characteristic of a new political regime. The political regime created by this "MAGA" power emphasizes state rights and is a large source of empowerment for governor Greg Abbott. The unique political situation created by the establishment of a "MAGA" centered regime ultimately speaks to how a political regimes approach can take into account a wider context of politics. Rather than focus on the individual policy preference of Greg Abbott, this project can monitor the immigration situation through a more complex lens. Therefore, this project–using the political regimes approach explained by Clayton and May (1999)–will be able to account for the sentiments of the larger socio-political regime in Texas and the power of the institutions operating within it.

Furthermore, Vargas (2017) and Paola Ramos (2024) provide relevant theories as to why anti-immigrant sentiment, and by extension, support for anti-immigrant policies, can be found within the Latino community. First, Vargas (2017) points to the existence of what he calls a "fear of association", in which Latino citizens "recognize… that regardless of their personal

immigration status, they could be impacted by punitive laws if they happen to look like an immigrant" (474). It is through the theory of "fear of association" where Ramos (2024) makes her unique contribution to the literature. Through her work, she explores the reasons why such a "fear" exists within the Latino community. Her work entitled "The Immigrants Who Oppose Immigration" provides the theory that some members of the Latino community wish to distance themselves in order to "prove" their own Americanness, to prove they belong in America. To "prove" themselves, Ramos claims many Latinos have embraced a sense of nativism, which describes the fear that immigrants, that newcomers, will distort or perhaps ruin a national identity. For the "MAGA" regime that extends even outside of Texas and miles away from the US-Mexico border, nativism is perceived as the cultural norm.

Given the literature regarding the presence of a distinct "fear of association" among the Latino community, I anticipate that Latinos living in Brownsville along the United States southern border will be hesitant to show outward disapproval towards the initiatives set forth by Abbott's Operation Lone Star. Therefore, I propose the following hypothesis:

*H1: Latinos show support for Operation Lone Star, indicating support for anti-immigrant policies if and only if said policy does not directly affect them.*

Next, I will explore the political regime in Texas through the lens of institutional racism. This term refers to the social forces, systems, and processes that interact with one another to generate and enforce inequality among racial or ethnic groups (Philbin 2018, 31). In the context of the restrictive immigration regime in Texas, Latinos are constantly suspected of and accused of being in the country illegally, regardless of their actual citizenship status. Therefore, interactions with a political institution such as Border Patrol could have the potential to adversely impact one's mental state. Yet, in contrast to the conventional wisdom, there is a large portion of

those who do view the Border Patrol as a necessary presence, one that provides stability and security to the southern border. As argued by Paola Ramos, Latinos are not a monolithic nor unified group, and could find this presence reassuring, rather than frightening (Cadava 2024). Therefore, it is highly plausible that a significant portion of Latinos living along the border would be supportive of the heightened security.

*H2: Latinos show support for Operation Lone Star's National Guard troops stationed at the United States-Mexico border more so than its migrant busing program.*

My thesis poses the broad research question, "how has Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star impacted the mental health of Latino residents living in Brownsville, Texas?" Consequently, I am interested in parsing out through my interviews through which measures of Operation Lone Star [migrant busing programs, National Guard deployment, and/or razor wire] contribute to the existence of fear and other adverse health outcomes within Latinos. To explore this question further, I pose the following hypothesis (which is divided into three parts):

*H3: Latinos experience adverse mental health outcomes as a result of their interactions with Operation Lone Star's razor wire.*

*$H3_2$ :Latinos experience adverse mental health outcomes as a result of their interactions with Operation Lone Star's migrant busing program.*

*$H3_3$: Latinos experience adverse mental health outcomes as a result of their interactions with Operation Lone Star's National Guard deployment.*

I am interested in studying the direct ways in which interactions with these three specific OLS measures can influence the mental health of Latinos, specifically through the fear of association, financial stress, and [personal] security concerns. To better understand this relationship, I am proposing the following model to accompany this hypothesis:

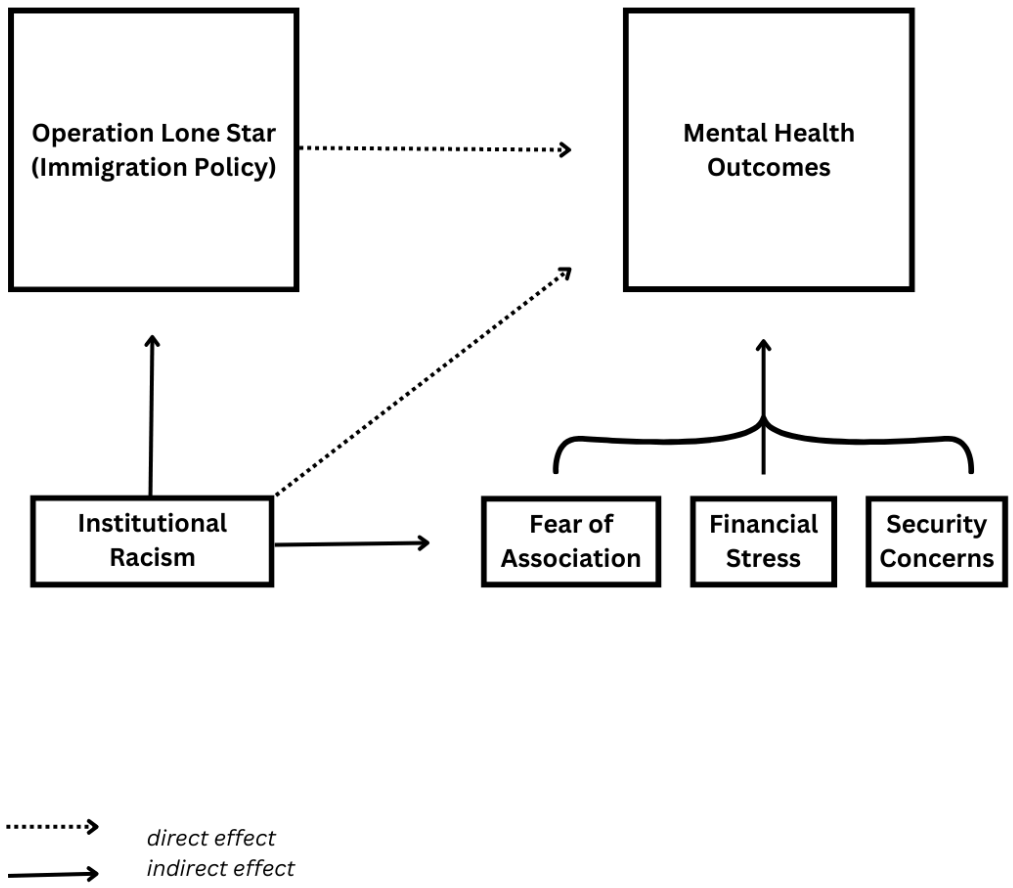


**Fig. 1:** Theorized relationship between Operation Lone Star and potential effects that may be contributing to mental health outcomes for Latinos living in Brownsville, Texas.

Paola Ramos (2024) explained that Latinos are not a monolithic nor unified group. In addition to her assertion, Alberta (2022) claims that there is a nontrivial minority within the Latino community that enthusiastically supports the Republican party. The "Latino Right", therefore, can be used within this thesis to describe the portion of the Latino electorate that support conservative candidates and conservative policy measures. The Latino Right includes those who support anti-immigration policy, because to an extent, "they may think Republicans

are racist, but some of them are going to vote for the Republicans anyway, because they're better on the economy, better on small business, better on regulation" (Alberta 2022).

*H4: Latinos show enthusiastic support for Operation Lone Star's measures, indicating agreement with the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment.*

Similar rhetoric has given rise to the idea of a "Great Replacement". The theory of "Great Replacement" in this context describes the idea that violence and prejudice against people of color (POC) is justified to prevent a demographic replacement of white Americans by non-white immigrants (Alberta 2022). This theory goes hand in hand with the language used by both president-elect Donald Trump and the Texas governor Greg Abbott. Language including "invasion" and "crisis" could contribute to the presence of this feeling within white American residents, and to a degree, white Latino residents as well.

As such an integral piece of the new anti-immigrant regime, this theory of replacement has expanded its reach to now include Latinos. I believe that some respondents will demonstrate support for heightened border enforcement at the state level in order to soothe their fears of being "replaced" by immigrants crossing the southern border (Serwer 2022). In contrast, if Latinos do not show support for heightened border enforcement at the state level, perhaps they are rejecting this notion that immigrants are "invading".

*H5: Latinos do not show support for Operation Lone Star's measures, indicating a rejection of the anti-immigrant sentiments of "great replacement" and "fear of association".*

## Methodology & Research Design

To examine the relationship between immigration policy and mental health for Latinos, I conducted a series of in depth interviews with fourteen legal residents of Brownsville. For my specific interview design, I utilized a variation of ¨snowball sampling¨, also called respondent driven sampling, in which my first interviewee in Brownsville connected me with an acquaintance also willing to participate in this project. The purpose of these interviews was to collect a large pool of information related to the construction of a political regime as well as the subsequent effect on the mental health of Latinos living along the southern border. In other words, these interviews aim to provide answers related to how residents feel about certain immigration measures [specifically the migrant busing program, the razor wire, and the deployment of National Guard] taken through Abbott's Operation Lone Star. Through these interviews I will explore the following: if and how residents are influenced by the political regime [which I characterize as an anti-immigrant "Make America Great Again" regime], and how their relationship within this regime is impacting their mental state if it is impacted at all.

Moreover, while creating my interview instrument, I have kept in mind the concepts elaborated by Clayton and May (1999) in regards to a political regime and the psychological concepts elaborated by Philbin (2018) and Vargas (2017) pertaining to the "fear of association" and "spill-over effect". Consequently, my interview questions are receptive to the fact that a "political regime" is going to be significant for understanding the state level rhetoric being utilized to justify the expansion and enforcement of Operation Lone Star. In addition, these questions are receptive to the idea that Latinos living in Texas may or may not be impacted by Operation Lone Star in different manners. Particularly, I will be analyzing their perceived

position within the “MAGA” regime to analyze how their mental health is being impacted by the implementation of Operation Lone Star.

It is important to note that for these interviews specifically, all participants were either natural born citizens or lawful permanent residents of Texas. Therefore, the results of these interviews lack an “undocumented” perspective. This means the results of these interviews could not be extrapolated to a significant portion of the Latino community, as the ability to speak with undocumented immigrants was not granted for this particular study. However, the interview results gathered for this project have generated a large pool of suggestive findings still very relevant to exploring a relationship between policy and mental health outcomes for Latinos living along the border.

Furthermore, these personal interviews were conducted in one region of Texas: Brownsville. This area was chosen not only because of my personal connection, with Brownsville being my father’s hometown, but also because it is home to four different border-crossings, all of which connect to the city of Matamoros in Tamaulipas [a state in Mexico]. All four of these bridges can provide access to immigrants wishing to cross into Texas, and have been the subject of Operation Lone Star’s increased border enforcement measures. However, the “Brownsville and Matamoros bridge” is the only privately owned passageway between Texas and Mexico in this region. An informed analysis of the region combined with responses from my interviews help to explore the interaction between residents and the border enforcement throughout both public and private crossings. Therefore, I believe through these interviews in Brownsville, key insights into the relationship between mental health and interactions with immigration enforcement at the state level should arise. Although I was unable to extrapolate my interview questions to residents across Texas, these suggestive findings are still

very relevant to exploring the relationship between Operation Lone Star as a border enforcement policy and the mental state of those living under its conditions.

# Chapter Three: The "MAGA" Regime

## Results & Discussion

### Introduction

In the following pages, I present a series of attitudes expressed by interviewees, beginning with their support for Operation Lone Star measures, specifically their attitudes towards the implementation of razor wire along the border, the deployment of troops to the border, and the migrant busing program. I will then turn to their attitudes related to mental health, what mental health looks like to them and how their mental health is or is not being affected by their interactions with immigration enforcement policy. The section will conclude with a comprehensive discussion of how these interviewees experience Operation Lone Star and the MAGA regime by utilizing the political regimes concept and the theory of "fear of association" discussed within the literature review.

### Experiencing Operation Lone Star: On the Ground Reactions

#### I. The MAGA Regime: Greg Abbott's Perceived Influence

Interviewees reflected a sense of limited knowledge related to immigration enforcement. However, responses given by interviewees pointed to several elements of the "MAGA regime" I am attempting to elaborate, including the development of anti-immigration rhetoric online, language of "crisis", and the heightened attention given to the border.

For example, participant #1, explained how even though he does not seek out political media himself, he is still "well aware of the governor," because Texas is "almost always on my social media". Yet, his perception of the content being shared online was very negative according to his statement. He wishes that "there is a path to citizenship that is easier," as he believes "yes they came illegally, but those are people too". This was a similar sentiment given by his mother

(participant #2), who shared the belief that perhaps Operation Lone Star could be re-evaluated in a way that "makes it work for everyone".

Similarly, participant #2 expressed how difficult it is for her to "shelter" her family from news related to immigration politics online. She explained to me that "it used to be easier", that she felt a topic like immigration was something "rarely discussed in [her] house before Trump came to office". Now, from her perspective, immigration politics is "everywhere, all online now". She explained that her children began to ask her questions about the border, expressing her distress as she was not prepared to "explain to a ten year old what ICE means".

Participant #3 also shares his perspective, claiming news of immigration used to be something he only "heard about in the newspapers", and that he "had to look for it during the [presidential] election". Now, he says "what our government officials are doing for our state," is "everywhere". In his statement, a new perspective emerges in which he believes, "politics should stay politics". While Participant #3 believes governing officials and online platforms "should be able to voice their opinion", he asserts that the expansion of immigration politics online was a negative development, one that is "a lot different than before".

## II. "Over and Over Again": Feeling Powerlessness & Indifference

Interviewees reflected a sense of limited support for the current enforcement of immigration policy in the state of Texas. While the issues of security and budget remained to be common themes and causes for concern within these participants, then Lone Star measures dulled the outward support for the restriction of immigration slightly.

For example, while discussing the implementation of razor wire along the southern border, Participant #4 expressed that there was "no point", as migrants will "just cut the wire again". His frustration and disappointment with the current handling of immigration enforcement

was made clear, as he asserts the belief that “we gotta do something but I don't know if this [razor wire] is helping”.

Similarly, Participant #5 describes her frustration, confusion, and worry caused by the implementation of razor wire. She describes feeling a sense of anxiety that people trying to cross into the United States will simply “climb over it [the border fence] and get hurt”. It is within these statements that a conflict between political and emotional concerns meet. There is a desire to have effective immigration enforcement, but once that enforcement infringes on the safety of individuals, that is when support tends to dull, even if only slightly. For Participant #5, she believes the razor wire is dangerous, that it “doesn’t do anything”, and she would be “highly worried” if her family, “especially [her] son”, were among those trying to cross the border.

Similarly, the deployment of troops to the border seems to also cause inner conflict as well. From Participant #4’s perspective, the government is spending too much money on enforcement measures, measures that are not working. He asks, “Where is he [Greg Abbott] going to get the money for more border patrol?”. His statement continues, “Governor Abbott believes [he] is doing a good job but I think there is a larger issue at play here,” as he asserts immigrants “still cross daily and many keep trying”. Within these statements, it appears residents of Brownsville are frustrated with the tangible success of Operation Lone Star, perhaps more so than the policy itself.

When prompted to reflect on the migrant busing program, Participant #5 reaffirmed her position that the current enforcement measures under Operation Lone Star are dangerous and should be re-evaluated. She states, “mass deportations are not the answer”, but concedes that she “really doesn’t know what the right answer is”. As I interpret her statements, she seems to possess feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and worry. I interpret both statements made by

both of these interviewees to reflect a limited support for Operation Lone Star, support that is primarily hindered by a perceived ineffectiveness in decreasing the amount of border crossings and injuries happening at the southern border.

## III. "Costs Too Much": The Perceived Economic Situation

Interviewees again reflected conflicted feelings when describing their attitudes towards immigrants in Texas, especially when prompted to think about immigrants from a financial perspective. While some expressed sympathy for undocumented individuals struggling financially, others asserted that immigrants who came here without the proper documentation should have no right to government assistance.

Participants #6 and #7, sisters who were born and raised in Brownsville, provide interesting perspectives about the presence of economic stress within the Latino community. In reference to the question, "could you describe your attitude towards a policy that provides economic assistance to undocumented immigrants", participant #6 answers, "what is the reason they are struggling economically? That would be the first question to ask." Elaborating, she claims that "those are hardworking people. But so are we." I interpret these statements to once again reflect an inner conflict within the Latino community. While she is open to supporting an economic assistance policy for undocumented individuals, she does so on the basis of a condition, those undocumented individuals who are "deserving" of that assistance. In addition, I flag the use of the term "we" in her statement. I interpret her use of the term to mean legal citizens residing in Texas; this is an interesting statement as her younger sister, participant #7, shares a slightly different reaction. She describes the experience of her husband, an undocumented immigrant who "worked his ass off. He paid all of our taxes. He came here and worked." From Participant #7's perspective, there "should definitely be some sort of assistance

for those who work. I am not sure what that would look like, though". The pair of sisters share attitudes that separate undocumented immigrants into two categories: "hardworking" and "undeserving". However, Participant #7 brings into question her sister's use of the term "we". From her response, her husband belongs in the "we" category, despite his citizenship status. Yet, her older sister's (Participant #6's) response suggests disagreement with the idea that undocumented and documented individuals should share the same assistance or have similar lived experiences.

Further, Participant #8 believes that economic assistance "costs too much money," and that he "doesn't see the point really". As he elaborates, "welfare is never intended to be long term, but more of a help up". Participant #9 shared a very similar sentiment, claiming that undocumented immigrants "expect us to pay for them to live here forever". For these interviewees, economic assistance would take away government resources for a perceived "us" and give it to "them". It is through these sentiments that I point to the construction of the racialized "illegal alien" as an abstract enemy, one that takes resources, opportunities, and more away from citizens (Dawson and Cohen 2002; Ngai 2004).

Finally, a discussion with Participant #10 provides a different perspective on economic assistance, claiming that refusing to help would "upset a lot of people with families". She draws heavily on the fact that her family naturalized in 2003, saying that there are "positives and negatives to this question stemming from diversity and financially". She appreciates the support her own family was afforded while being naturalized, and asserts that regardless of how they come to Texas, "they bring community here too". For her, the government needs to "prioritize" assistance to anyone who needs it "regardless of a piece of paper". In contrast to the more

hesitant support of interviewees discussed above, she provides explicit support for all those in Texas, even if they are undocumented.

## IV. The MAGA Regime: The Presence of Fear & Mental Stress

Interviewees reflected a heightened perception of how the law, how society, and how they themselves treat undocumented immigrants. Through this section, I present responses related to the mental health of interviewees living under restrictive immigration politics.

Participant #11 opens her statement on stress by saying "I have a home back in Mexico, and if it gets worse, I'll go back". When prompted to elaborate on what she means by "if it gets worse", she explained she feels regardless of how hard she's worked, "they don't want to accept us". Once again, the language of an "us" vs "them" distinction is utilized within participant responses, suggesting that this pattern is not just an accident. She continues, "it's not just illegal immigrants here". She asserts that "it's a lot deeper than that," and that she believes "having a paper saying I belong here doesn't mean I feel like I belong". Her statement reflects the sentiments expressed by Participant #12, who believes that "we [Latinos] are going to suffer so much". When prompted to elaborate, she claims "anywhere I go, I feel like I'm being judged". Within both of their statements, I find once again a suggestion that even Latinos [regardless of citizenship status] experience the effects of anti-immigrant sentiment.

Similarly, Participant #13 recalled her experience seeking out mental health services through her university. She explained to me that she "felt scared sharing something so personal", and was also worried about "how my family would react if they knew". Moreover, she expressed the "fear she had put her father at risk" by seeking out services for her anxiety disorder. According to Participant #13, some of the first questions the university appointed therapist asked were related to "the usual questions about race, and gender," as well as "family background". It

was through the latter question that she expressed her anxiety about explaining her delicate family situation to the therapist. Her father came to the United States on a visa that could expire soon, leading to her hesitation to share any information related to her family, especially not to a university therapist who "has access to my home address through the university". It is through these conversations that I suggest the presence of a distinct fear found within the Latino community, due to their perceived position within the "MAGA" regime. Both societal relationships (as described by Participants #11 and #12) and institutional relationships (like the one described by Participant #13) can be affected by this fear. I suggest that within this group of interviewees is a fear that they need to prove they do belong in America, or that they are "American enough", regardless of their actual citizenship status.

## V. "We Aren't Criminals": The Desire to be Seen as American

A statement made by Participant #14 expands upon the sentiments expressed within the previous section. She makes the assertion that although she has not witnessed detainments of immigrants herself, she "is always worried," because "what if that was my mother". As she explains, although she and her family are all native born Texans, she continues to "get mistaken as Mexican" in her everyday life. As she asserts, this mistake is "not offensive," but she often feels the need to "explain my entire backstory". She continues, "I feel like I did something wrong when I'm asked [about her race and about her status]".

Similarly, according to the statements made by Participant #12, there is a distinction between recognizing that undocumented immigrants are "human beings" and the desire to "prove we aren't criminals". These conversations once again suggest the existence of an inner conflict, one that can manifest itself through the language used by Latinos ["us vs. them"], their hesitance

to utilize mental health services, and their support for anti-immigrant policies to "prove" their own belonging.

## VI. "Us" vs "Them": The Perceptions of Immigrants in Texas

Participant #12 explains from the perspective of a naturalized citizen, how she feels about the ideas of an "immigrant crisis". She expresses that "we come here to work," further insisting that she is "American and I did it the right way". The language of "us" and "them" are flipped from her perspective, as she is assuming the role of immigrants rather than the role of American in her statement. Yet, she affirms her Americanness at the same time, by claiming she [immigrated] the "right way".

Similarly, Participant #3 once again asserts that "there are a lot of people here [in Texas]. It can leave us with nothing". From his perspective, there may truly be a "crisis", but from his perspective, the government is not addressing the problem. Instead, he believes that "they [the government] need[s] to figure out something…it's been a long, long time". His point of view utilizes the language of "us" and "them", suggesting once again that there may exist a perceived distinction within the Latino community between undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general. Rather than the perceived generalization of undocumented immigrants as this abstract enemy of "us" [meaning Americans], perhaps members of the Latino community view immigrants through a different distinction: "deserving" vs. "illegal".

Consequently, these interviewees suggested the existence of a unique desire of Latinos to distinguish themselves from the "illegal alien" and prove their own Americanness as a method of self preservation within the current immigration regime. Through these interviews, I suggest these acts of self preservation increase Latino support for anti-immigration measures, while simultaneously decreasing their mental well-being.

## Analysis

This section will examine the politics of Operation Lone Star on the ground, based on the interviews with fourteen individuals who are themselves all legal residents of Brownsville, Texas and therefore living directly under this immigration policy's enforcement. It is within this discussion that I will examine the intersection between a political immigration regime and the mental health of its inhabitants, generating a series of suggestive findings based on the information provided by interviewees. In other words, this section will provide my own institutional analysis of Operation Lone Star, which will tie institutional analysis to mental health outcomes.

First, I hypothesized the following reaction to Operation Lone Star:

*H1: Latinos show support for Operation Lone Star, indicating support for anti-immigrant policies if and only if said policy does not directly affect them.*

Within the small sample of subjects interviewed for this research, I suggest that this hypothesis is partially supported by the responses given within the interview. The results subheading entitled, "The MAGA Regime: Greg Abbott's Perceived Influence" provides the best evidence to support this hypothesis, as some respondents indicated that some measures under Operation Lone Star, while perceived to be effective, filled them with a sense of hesitancy. Specifically, Participant #2 explained how difficult it was for her to "shelter" her own family from news related to immigration politics, how she was experiencing distress at having to explain Operation Lone Star and similar policies to her young children. While it seemed to fill her with hesitancy and anxiety when the policy could potentially impact herself or her family, she seemed to not have those feelings when such policies did not impact her. She even admitted

how politics were  “rarely discussed” before the governor began to push immigration reform as his central platform.

In a similar manner, the results presented in section V entitled, “We Aren’t Criminals”: The Desire to be Seen as American”, explores the response of participant #14, which expands upon the idea that outward support for anti-immigrant policy may be conditional. She made the point within her statement that she finds herself “worried” about immigration policy because “what if that was my mother”. Once again, I am interpreting these comments to mean that there is only a partial support for each measure of Operation Lone Star, the most controversial of the measures being the migrant busing program, as this program presents the most opportunity to be mistaken as an immigrant, or have a close connection with someone who is directly impacted.

This hypothesis aimed at addressing the presence of the “risk avoidant behaviors” explored by (Pedraza 2017), in which her argument states that Latinos, regardless of citizenship status, will make choices based on their connections to those who are vulnerable to immigration restriction policies. It is through these interview responses that I argue this risk avoidant behavior is present within this sample, and manifests itself through the partial support for anti-immigrant policy measures, specifically the migrant busing program. The partial support for anti-immigrant policy can be explained through their emotional and personal connections to members of the immigrant community who are directly vulnerable to such restrictive policies. In other words, while the majority of respondents did express outward support for OLS measures, this support diminished once the participant expressed a connection to someone who could be directly affected, making it difficult to assess true attitudes about the policy.

Next, I hypothesized the following reaction to specific OLS measures:

*H2: Latinos show support for Operation Lone Star's National Guard troops stationed at the United States-Mexico border more so than its migrant busing program.*

Once again, the sentiments expressed by interviewees provide only minimal support for the above hypothesis. The final section of the results entitled,"Us" vs "Them": The Perceptions of Immigrants in Texas", provides the most evidence for this hypothesis, especially through the statements of Participant #3. Within his statement, he asserts that there may be a "crisis", and that "they [the government] need[s] to figure out something". I interpret these statements to mean that he would support a restrictive anti-immigrant policy, given that the policy shows a certain level of success at deterring illegal immigration.

However, I did not find substantial evidence within the statements expressed within the interviews that indicate a clear preference for the National Guard troops over the migrant busing program. Rather, I found that most respondents in this sample did not have a strong preference for any one measure within Operation Lone Star, with the condition that the measure did not view them as the subject of interest.

Furthermore, I hypothesized that Latinos would experience adverse mental health outcomes due to their interactions with each of the three measures of OLS that I have highlighted:

*H3: Latinos experience adverse mental health outcomes as a result of their interactions with Operation Lone Star's razor wire.*

*$H3_2$:Latinos experience adverse mental health outcomes as a result of their interactions with Operation Lone Star's migrant busing program.*

*$H3_3$: Latinos experience adverse mental health outcomes as a result of their interactions with Operation Lone Star's National Guard deployment.*

Within my sample, I found that there is significant evidence to support the notion that restrictive immigration policy negatively impacts the mental state of Latinos, regardless of their citizenship status. It is through the concepts presented by Morgan Philbin (2018) and Vargas (2017) that I will attempt to elaborate on my suggestive findings. Morgan Philbin (2018) is credited with the "spillover effect" thesis in which he explains how Latinos are treated the same as undocumented immigrants under these restrictive immigration policies. Vargas (2017) explains a similar phenomenon, in which Latinos will develop a fear that they will be mistaken as an immigrant, leading to negative mental health outcomes.

In the responses highlighted above in the results, almost each participant made reference to a level of stress, anxiety, or fear at being associated with immigrants or even being themselves the target of a restrictive policy. Participant #13 gives the most convincing evidence in support of this hypothesis, as she explains her own reluctance to seek out mental health care due to the fear of personal information being exposed or putting her father at risk.

Once again, I argue that the findings described above suggest that societal relationships (as described by Participants #11 and #12) and institutional relationships (like the one described by Participant #13) can be affected by this fear of association. I suggest that within this group of interviewees is a fear that they need to prove they do belong in America, or that they are "American enough", regardless of their actual citizenship status.

Next, I hypothesized that some Latinos who would outwardly agree with anti-immigrant sentiment, showing support for all three of Operation Lone Star's measures:

*H4: Latinos show enthusiastic support for Operation Lone Star's measures, indicating agreement with the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment.*

This hypothesis was not supported by the evidence presented within the above interview results. I did not find substantial evidence that Latinos were enthusiastic about anti-immigrant policy, nor that they agreed with anti-immigrant sentiment. Rather, I found that there was a perceived "correct" way to immigrate and an "incorrect" way to immigrate according to the conversations I had with these subjects. Interviewees expressed frustration that Latinos were all being put into one box with illegal immigrants, that "it's not just illegal immigrants here". Therefore, while frustration at being mistaken as an illegal immigrant was present within a significant amount of responses, this does not equate to agreeing with anti-immigrant sentiment. I argue that the responses above do not think immigrants are "criminals" nor that they are "invading". Instead, I argue that these findings suggest that there is a distinction being made from "illegal" immigrants and "legal" immigrants, in which the prolonged presence of illegal immigrants is seen as a negative consequence of restrictive immigration enforcement which views all members of the Latino community as the same.

My final hypothesis aims at understanding the following reaction to Operation Lone Star:

*H5: Latinos do not show support for Operation Lone Star's measures, indicating a rejection of the anti-immigrant sentiments of "great replacement" and "fear of association".*

It is through this final hypothesis that I am attempting to understand explicitly the existence of fear within the Latino community: fear of being mistaken for an illegal immigrant and the fear that illegal immigrants are "taking over".

While some participants (notably participant #4) expressed frustration that the implementation of razor wire was not working, and that migrants would "just cut the wire again", there does seem to be a desire within this sample group to separate themselves from the

immigrant community. Throughout these interviews, I found no substantial and enthusiastic support for Operation Lone Star, nor did I find substantial evidence that Latinos in this sample completely disagreed either. Yet, within this sample, I found the existence of a certain language that aimed to separate the natural born Latinos from the migrant Latinos. The use of an "us" vs "them" dichotomy in these interviews points to a desire to assert their right to be in Texas, regardless of the perception that all Latinos and illegal immigrants can fit into the same box.

Furthermore, respondents did not enthusiastically support OLS measures, but the theoretical idea of restricting immigration does not generate immediate disagreement. It is only when the measure targets the participants themselves, or one of their social connections, that the restriction of immigration is seen as a negative thing within this specific sample. In other words, the interviewees expressed partial support for the hypothesis. I found responses given suggest the presence of a fear of being mistaken as an immigrant, but do not support the theory of "Great Replacement" in which immigrants are taking over.

## Conclusions

Through in depth interviews with individuals living in Brownsville, I have attempted through this thesis to elaborate the ways in which Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star may shape the experiences of Latinos with their own mental health. Through this thesis I have attempted to illuminate the ways in which the lived experience of Brownsville Latino residents coincide with scholars' theoretical examinations of institutions, race, and politics within Texas' current immigration regime. Through my findings, I suggest the existence of a fear of association, one that shapes the everyday interactions of Latinos, regardless of their actual citizenship status.

To varying degrees, political subjects in this research develop support for restrictive immigration measures, contrary to conventional wisdom. Interviewees have indicated that this may be in part due to this fear of being associated as an immigrant, especially an *illegal* immigrant, as this would lead to accusations of being "un-American". Interestingly, all participants made explicit or indirect reference to an "us" vs "them" dichotomy, in which legal citizens are "us" and illegal immigrants are "them". Those who leaned into this dichotomy more readily were quick to show signs of support for anti-immigration policy measures, whereas those who were hesitant to separate themselves from immigrant communities showed only a partial support for OLS measures.

Interviews also suggest the existence of a shared feeling of powerlessness and frustration when prompted to think of the future, due to economic struggles being faced. Some participants pointed to frustration at how much the government spends on immigration measures, while others have indicated that illegal immigration is the root cause of their economic situation. In the case of the argument that the Texas government spends "too much", interviewees showed partial support for anti-immigration policy measures, with the caveat that they perceive the measures as

succeeding in deterring illegal immigration. In the case of illegal immigration causing economic struggles for Latino citizens, interviewees demonstrated higher levels of support for anti-immigration measures presented under Operation Lone Star.

Yet, the interviewee sample utilized for this project includes participants all self-identifying as legal residents of Brownsville, Texas. It would be misguided and inaccurate to claim that the results of these interviews can definitively capture the sentiments of all twelve million Latinos currently living throughout Texas, and can make no claim to understand Operation Lone Star from the perspective of an undocumented immigrant. With these limitations in mind, future research should aim to capture the sentiments of Latinos both documented and undocumented, living throughout the United States. A future comparative study in which the suggestive findings presented within this thesis, pointing to a unique fear of association that impacts one's  are placed into conversation with the perspective of undocumented Latinos would be a great expansion of this work, and could perhaps support the findings presented here.

With the above references in mind, I am proposing the following survey instrument to guide further research aimed at exploring the experiences of Latinos navigating the anti-immigrant regime I have described throughout the thesis. This survey instrument is well theorized and gives special attention to the dimension of mental health, which has previously been neglected in this area of research. The survey below is intended to measure Latino support for immigration policy measures more generally, through a short series of questions related to fear of association, tolerance for illegal immigration, and perception of economic struggles.

The survey instrument would have an introduction context preceding the questions, which would set the stage for understanding Latino policy support, given the context of the

MAGA regime and fear of association. The introductory context for the survey would be read as following:

> "The current socio-political atmosphere is marked by a distinct political rhetoric made popular by Donald Trump in 2016, through his campaign promise to "Make America Great Again" through heightened immigration enforcement. Texas governor Greg Abbott has responded to this desire by similarly pushing for his Operation Lone Star, claiming that these restrictions are needed to stop the "invasion" of Texas specifically (Goodman 2024). Restrictions include placing razor wire along the border, increasing the number of National Guard troops in Texas, and removing illegal immigrants out of Texas. Thus, Operation Lone Star asserts the necessity of state intervention in immigration enforcement to "Make America Great Again" and continues to be at the heart of Texas immigration policy."

The survey instrument itself would pose questions presented in the following order:

1. To what degree would you agree with the following statement, "I feel confident that my government's immigration policies are heading in the right direction?"
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neutral
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
2. To what degree would you agree with the following statement, "I believe my government is doing all it can to remove or relocate undocumented immigrants from my hometown?"
    - Strongly agree

- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

3. To what degree would you agree with the following statement, “I would allow an undocumented immigrant to seek refuge in my own home?”
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neutral
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
4. To what degree would you agree with the following statement, “I would be offended if asked if I was an immigrant?”
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neutral
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
5. To what degree would you agree with the following statement, “Others who are members of my ethnic background are in control of their own financial situations?”
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neutral

- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6. To what degree would you agree with the following statement, “I am in control of my own financial situation?”
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neutral
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree

The first two questions of this survey aim to get at general support for restrictive immigration policy following the brief description of Operation Lone Star. I have placed these questions immediately following the description of OLS to have necessary background information readily available to participants, who may not have heard of the term “Operation Lone Star”, but have perhaps witnessed or felt the effects of the policy. The next two questions aim to better understand the relative tolerance Latinos hold against undocumented immigrants in their hometown. For instance, if a respondent “strongly agrees” that they would be willing to house an undocumented immigrant in their own home, they would be politically tolerant of undocumented immigrants and perhaps reject a “fear of association”. The final two questions aim to get at perceptions of the economic situation in Texas, and their perceptions of the cause of said economic hardship.

The conclusions of this thesis point toward a collective fear of being perceived as “other”, as being perceived as the “enemy” within the MAGA regime. Yet, even in this volatile political regime in which certain racialized groups are being denoted as the enemy, Latinos

continue to assert their right to be in this country. Latinos, especially in Brownsville, assert their "Americanness" through support for Operation Lone Star, while also believing that the current anti-immigration policy is not doing enough to stop illegal migration into the state. Only time and much more research will be able to validate the feelings and perceptions this group has in regards to anti-immigrant sentiment presented here. While still suggestive, this thesis illuminates the ways in which an anti-immigrant regime can have a substantial impact on the mental state of Latinos living under said anti-immigrant regime.

# Appendix

## I. Interview Instrument:

**Demographic Questions:**

1. How would you describe your personal identity? (Check all that apply)
    - ☐ Hispanic
    - ☐ Latino/a
    - ☐ Tejano/a
    - ☐ Mexican
    - ☐ American
    - ☐ Immigrant
    - ☐ Other:
2. What is the highest level of education you have received?
    - ☐ Less than High School
    - ☐ High school diploma/GED
    - ☐ Some College
    - ☐ Bachelor's Degree
    - ☐ Master's Degree
    - ☐ Doctoral Degree
3. What is your employment status?
    - ☐ Employed Full-Time
    - ☐ Employed Part-Time
    - ☐ Un-employed
    - ☐ Self-employed
    - ☐ Student
    - ☐ Retired
4. What is your current financial goal?
    - ☐ Paying off a Debt
    - ☐ Buying a Home
    - ☐ Starting a Business
    - ☐ Saving for Education
    - ☐ Saving for Retirement
    - ☐ Other:
5. What is your current occupation?

**Sentiment Questions:**

1. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “Immigrants who enter the state of Texas illegally are criminals.”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree

2. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “I’m an immigrant, but I’m also an American. We are allowing our country to be overrun.”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
3. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “Stricter border enforcement will help limit the amount of illegal immigration into Texas”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree

4. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “Texas government is doing its best to protect residents of Texas”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
5. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “Razor wire is an effective means of border enforcement”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
6. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “More troops at the border is an effective means of border enforcement”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
7. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “Removing or relocating any illegal immigrants detained at the border is an effective means of border enforcement”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree

8. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “Immigration is a controversial topic in my hometown”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
9. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “News coverage about immigration in my hometown is overall positive”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
10. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “I receive most of my news about immigration from the local newspaper”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
11. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “I receive most of my news about immigration from social media”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
12. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “I receive most of my news about immigration from local radio stations”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
13. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “I am well aware of the Texas governor”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
14. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “I am well aware of politics in my hometown”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree

- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

15. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “The governor should have the right to speak freely about immigration”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
16. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “The government should provide economic assistance to struggling Texans”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree
17. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: “The government should provide economic assistance to immigrants”
    - ☐ Strongly agree
    - ☐ Agree
    - ☐ Neutral
    - ☐ Disagree
    - ☐ Strongly disagree

**Conversational Questions:**

1. How would you describe your overall experience living in Texas?
2. What does the term “Latino” mean to you?
    a. What about “Tejano”?
3. Do you believe that Texas allows too many people to enter the state, lets the correct amount of people enter the state, or does not allow enough people to enter the state?
    a. Why do you think so?
4. What does “border patrol” mean to you?
5. Have you personally witnessed detainments by Texas authorities/ICE in your neighborhood or in your hometown?
    a. How did that make you feel?
6. How would you describe your feelings towards a policy that creates stricter border enforcement?
7. Could you describe your attitude toward a policy that removes immigrants from the state?
    a. Would your feelings change if you found out removal was on a voluntary-basis?
8. Could you describe your feelings towards a policy that would increase the amount of troops or agents at the border?
    a. Would seeing more agents around the border or in your hometown make you feel safer?
9. Could you describe your attitude toward a policy that provides economic assistance to undocumented immigrants?
10. To your knowledge, has the issue of immigration improved, worsened, or stayed the same throughout your life?

    a. Why do you think so?
11. Do you feel issues in Texas are happening all across the US?
12. Does the word “crisis” make you feel a certain way?
    a. What about “invasion”?
13. Do you feel as though Texas and its government is providing a good example for the rest of the US on how to handle immigration?
14. Do you feel the Texas government is currently supporting you and your needs?
15. How frequently do you experience stress-related symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, or irritability?
16. What strategies or activities do you use to cope with stress in your life?
17. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your current level of stress, with 1 being minimal stress and 10 being extremely stressed?
18. What are the main sources of stress in your life currently?
19. What does mental health mean to you?
    a. How would you rate your overall understanding of mental health issues, on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being very understanding and 10 being not understanding at all?
20. Have you ever sought professional help for mental health services?
    a. Are you aware of mental health resources available in your community or workplace?

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